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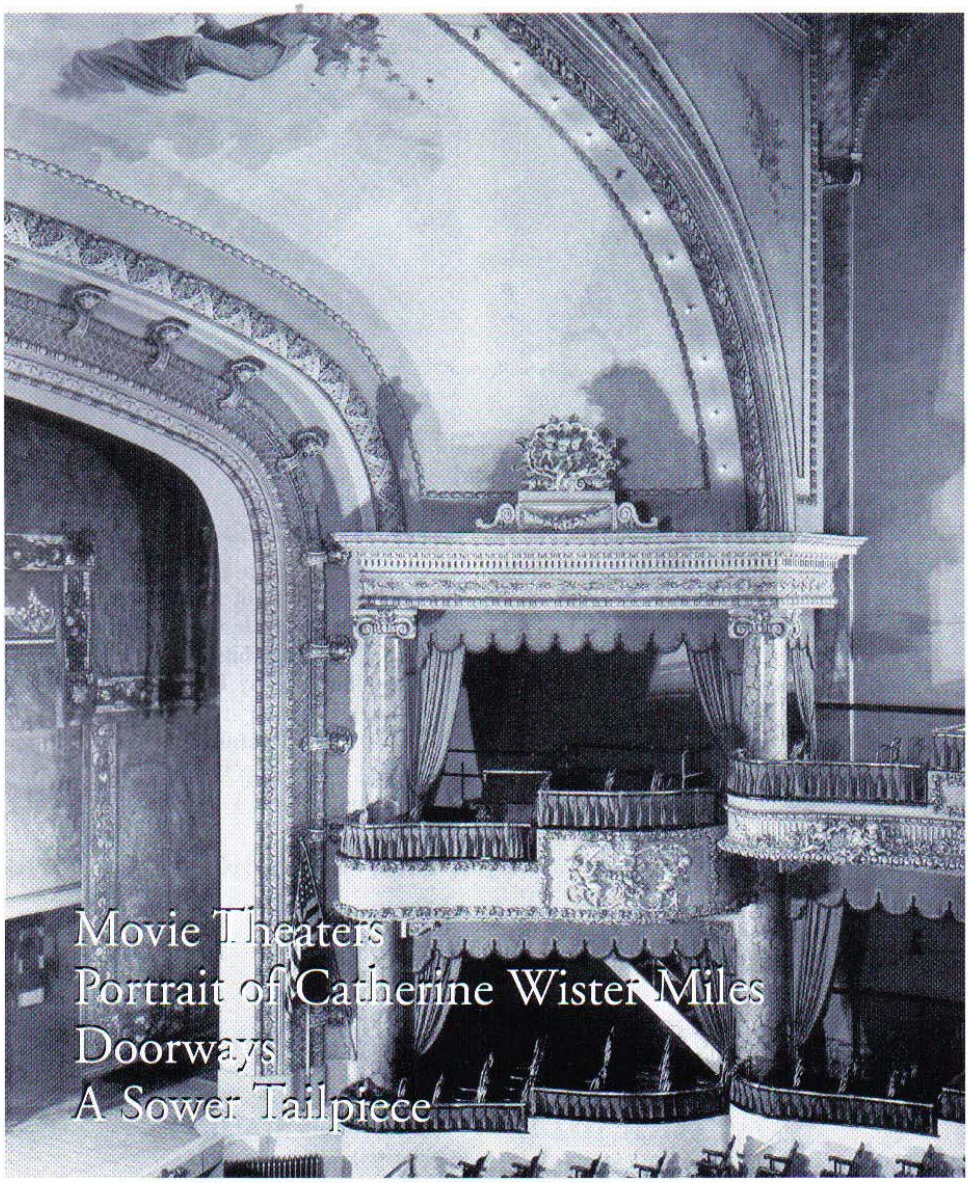


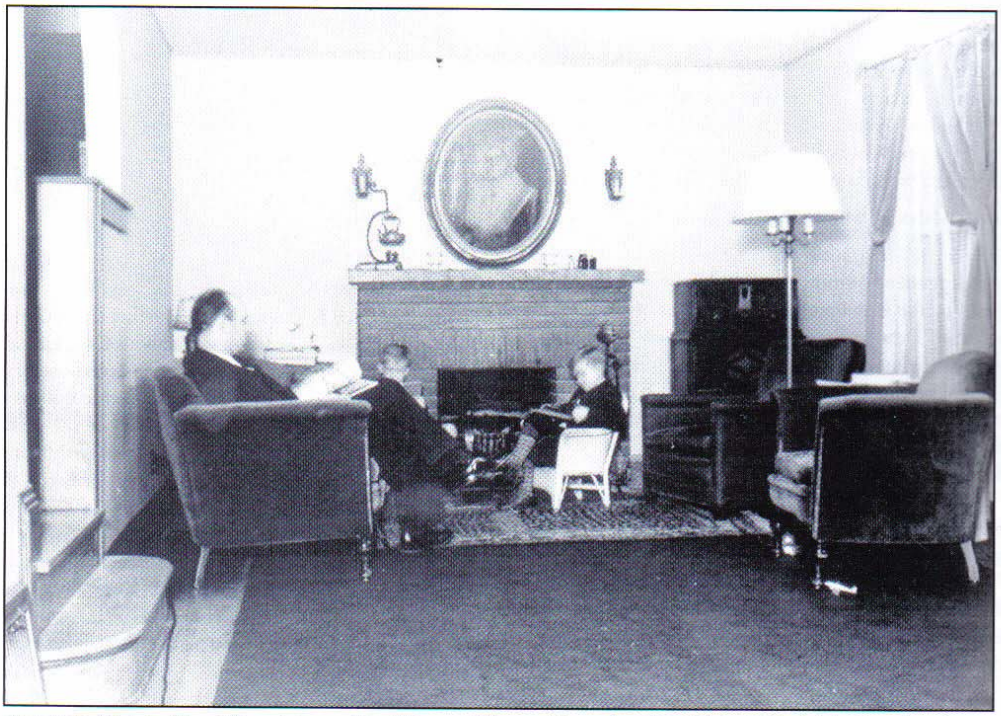
Movie Theaters I
Portrait of Catherine Wister Miles
Doorways I
A Sower Tailpiece

volume 57 number 2 fall 2007

A PORTRAIT OF CATHERINE WISTER MILES

By David Duncan McCann

The 1936 photograph below shows my father, uncle, and grandfather sitting by the fireplace. Above the fireplace is a portrait of a woman. My grandfather, Donald Miles McCann (seated in the stuffed chair) used to say with enthusiasm that the portrait was of his papa's mama's papa's papa's mama. When the portrait came to my father I was a high school senior and since then I have been absorbed by the portrait—who it is, what kind of life the sitter led, and who painted it.



The portrait of Catherine Wister Miles at the home of Donald Duncan McCann and his sons Donald Jr., (right) and Richard (left). The author is the son of Donald, Jr. Courtesy David McCann.

Catherine Wister Miles

The portrait is of Catherine Wister Miles, daughter of John and Ann (Rubenkam) Wister. John Wister was a successful wine merchant who, in 1744, built a summer home in Germantown. This house, known as Grumblethorpe, has an interesting history, as it is where John Wister's granddaughter, diarist Sally Wister, stayed and where Gen. James Agnew died during the Revolution.[1]

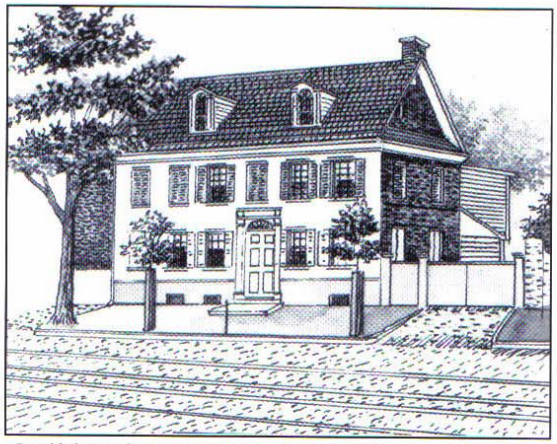
Catherine was born on January 2, 1742, the second child of John and Ann Wister. Little is known of her youth but we do know that at the age of nineteen she fell in love with a young soldier who fought in the French and Indian War and had risen to the rank of captain in His Majesty's armed forces. Samuel Miles was an ardent Baptist while Catherine was a Quaker. In spite of her father's objections to the marriage (perhaps for religious or financial reasons) Catherine Wister and Samuel Miles were married on February 16, 1761.[2]

1 It is now a house museum open to the public.

2 Milton Rubicam, "The Wistar-Wister Family: A Pennsylvania Family's Contribution Toward American Cultural Development," *Pennsylvania History* Vol. 20 (April 1953), 142–164.

All was eventually forgiven, and John Wister helped Miles set up in the wine and rum business. He later went into the dry goods and housewares business. Samuel also bought 9,000 acres of land in Centre County.[3] For a number of years Catherine and Samuel settled in Philadelphia (they also had a house in Montgomery County) and raised their children. Between 1762 and 1785 Catherine gave birth to fifteen children, six of whom died very young.

Catherine's social life can be caught in glimpses. Jacob Hiltzheimer's diary records on March 3, 1770: "Later went with Samuel Miles, his wife, and my wife to Frankford." On January 29, 1774: "In the afternoon went down to the wharf to see the skaters on the Delaware; afterward to John Wister's, where I drank coffee with Richard Wister, Casper Wister, Daniel Wister and wife, Benjamin Morgan and wife, Samuel Miles and wife, and William."[4]



Grumblethorpe, the summer home of John and Ann Wister, parents of Catherine, was built in 1744. Drawing by John Richards. GHS archives.

Samuel Miles at war, Catherine at home

In 1774 Samuel Miles cast his lot with those seeking independence from Britain. He was appointed a Colonel by the Continental Congress and in that capacity was sent to Delaware, New Jersey, and New York City. In August 1776 Samuel and his Pennsylvania riflemen were in Brooklyn, attempting to avoid a pitched battle with the German Hessians. However, his regiment was discovered and battle ensued, leading to many casualties. Colonel Miles was captured, and held on a prisoner of war ship.

During this time Catherine was busy keeping her family together. It appears from Wister ledger books that Catherine helped keep the business accounts.

One letter she wrote is preserved. She wrote it in December 1776 to David Rittenhouse, astronomer and later director of the U.S. Mint, from her second home in Spring Mill, Montgomery County. It reads:

> Sir,
>
> Being informed that a number of dwelling houses in Philadelphia are taken possession of for the use of the soldiery, and having a new house in Second Street next to Mr. Hillegas which has not yet been occupied by any person, I beg you would use your influence to prevent the same being made use of for the Army as it may be easily supposed that in such case it would be liable to much injury. Col. Miles being from home [I] have taken the liberty to address myself to you with hope will not be taken amiss.
>
> I am your Friend & h[um]ble ser[van]t
>
> Catherine Miles[5]

As a colonel, it appears Samuel Miles was given certain privileges. In correspondence from General William Howe, Samuel Miles was granted a two-week parole provided he did nothing to further the patriot cause. In December 1777 he was reunited with Catherine at their Spring Mill home. In April 1778 he returned for good. With the war over in 1781 the family settled down again. Samuel Miles became a judge, Captain of the First City Troop, member of the Council of Censors, member of the Common Council of Philadelphia, trustee of the University of Pennsylvania and, in 1790, Mayor of Philadelphia.

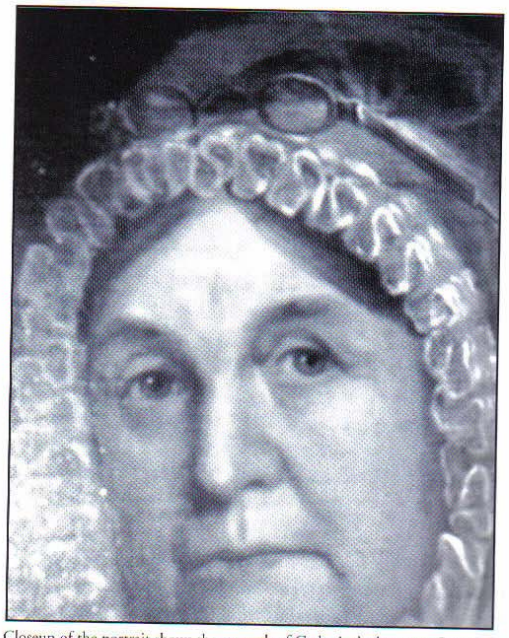
He had sold much of his Centre County land to farmers, but built the Centre Furnace to produce iron, and thus helped create Centre County itself. He formed a partnership with John Patton and Samuel's son John to run the iron foundry.[6]

Catherine died on October 24, 1797. Her death was reported in the *Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser*[7]: "On the 24th of this month at Cheltenham, Mrs. Catherine Miles, the wife of Col. Samuel Miles. Of this excellent woman it may be truly said that she fulfilled all the duties of wife, mother, mistress, and friend as one that was to give an account hereafter of her conduct. She was beloved in life and died lamented by all who knew her."

Catherine is buried at Mount Moriah Cemetery next to her husband. He died on December 29, 1805.

3 "Miles Helped Forge County," by Rich Karstetter, *Centre Daily Times*, December 19, 2005.
4 Jacob Cox Parsons, ed. *Extracts from the Diary of Jacob Hiltzheimer* (Philadelphia: William F. Fell & Company, 1893), 20, 28.
5 Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia (Correspondence 1776–1802).
6 Sylvester K. Stevens, *The Centre Furnace Story: A Return to Our Roots* (Centre County Historical Society).
7 Microfilm copy courtesy of The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Portrait of Catherine Wister Miles. Courtesy David McCann.



Closeup of the portrait shows the strength of Catherine's character. Courtesy David McCann.

The portraits

Catherine had her portrait painted in 1797 shortly before her death. The portrait captures her spirit and intelligence. An infrared image shows the eyes being of different colors but the final portrait has them the same. The infrared also shows no under-drawing—it was Stuart's practice to put paint on ground right away. Catherine is wearing custom-made sliding glasses, pushed up on her bonnet. Glasses were an expensive item at the time so we know she was a woman of means.

Samuel Miles had his portrait painted in 1803, two years before his death, by the noted portraitist Gilbert Stuart. That portrait is now at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington. How did the portraits become separated? Apparently a fire at the Milesburg, Pennsylvania mansion built by Samuel and Catherine Miles's son-in-law set the portraits on differing paths. Elizabeth F. McKean (her great-grandfather Joseph married Hannah, daughter of Samuel and Catherine) received the portrait of Samuel Miles and she subsequently donated it to the Smithsonian.

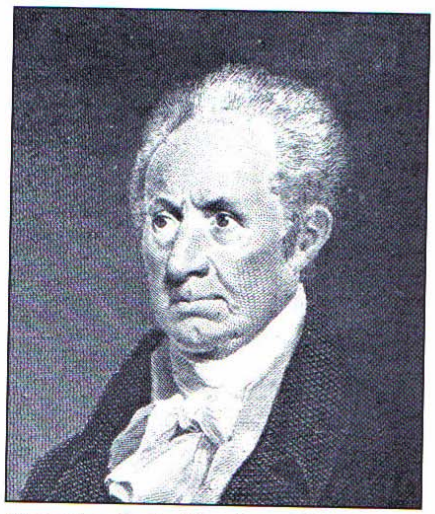
Mary Miles McCann received the portrait of her great-grandmother, Catherine Wister Miles. It was not until 1973 that soot from the house fire was removed (by the Esselburn Studios in Akron, Ohio).

Although the portrait has not been authenticated as by Gilbert Stuart, I believe there are numerous clues that suggest his hand. At the time Catherine's portrait was painted, her brother Daniel was living in Grumblethorpe, and Catherine would probably have visited Germantown then. Gilbert Stuart's studio was nearby on the other side of Germantown Avenue. According to Charles F. Jenkins, Washington "often stopped at the stoop of the old Wister house, some doors above, to chat with the merry company that would gather there."[8]

The portrait is of a strong woman, like others by Stuart. Expert Frank Mather writes "To the men he gave what the American man wanted, a most resolute and resemblant face-painting… Towards the American woman Gilbert Stuart's attitude was that of all perceptive foreigners. She was a marvel, a puzzle, and a delight. She was irresistibly herself, an independent and unconditioned existence, in a sense that the American man, busied with nation making, could not be. So Stuart read her, confessed her, and most gallantly celebrated her, with the result that the mothers and daughters of the early Republic are today about twice as alive as the fathers and sons."[9]

8 *Washington in Germantown* (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1905).

9 Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., "Face Painter and Feminist" in *Estimates in Art (Series 2), Sixteen Essays on American Painters of the Nineteenth Century* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1959), 9,10.



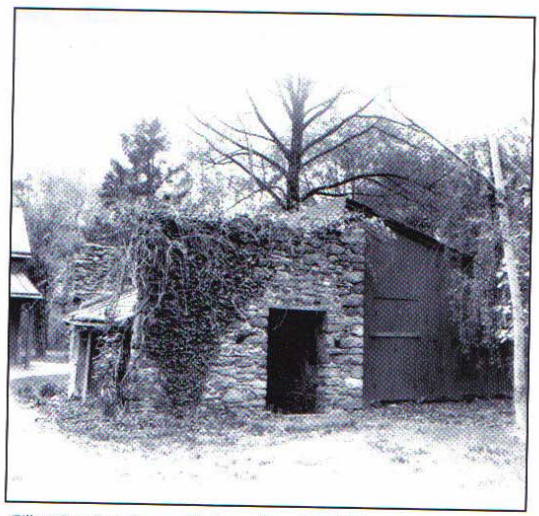
An engraving of artist Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828). GHS archives.

Another writer notes that while Stuart "varied his response to the subject, the evocation of inner being, often in the form of an expression of either momentary or steadied-gaze interaction with the viewer, was generally characteristic of his work."[10] John Neal characterized Stuart's portraits of women as "creatures of flesh and blood… somewhat too strongly individualized perhaps for female portraiture."[11]

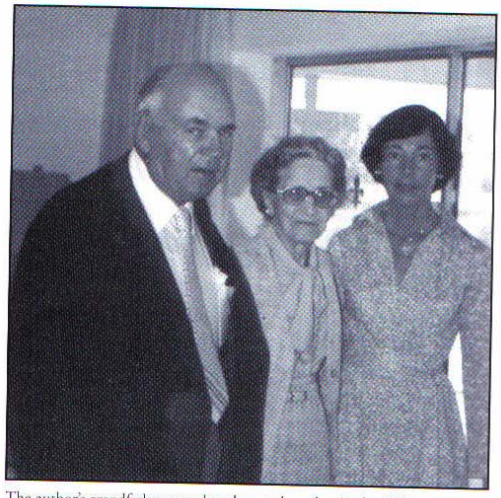
"[Stuart's] genius lay in his ability to capture an animated personality rather than mere outward appearances," says Robin Jaffee Frank in *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures.*

The surface of the painting is a panel with a very smooth surface, grained to produce Stuart's signature twill canvas effect. He used the same surface for the portrait of Samuel Miles. Stuart's daughter, Jane, reported that her father's cabinetmaker cut teeth in a plane-iron and dragged it backward, texturing the panel.[12]

The portrait is unsigned, which was common with Stuart. He wanted to let the brushstrokes speak for themselves. It is possible that the S shapes on Catherine's bonnet are a form of signature. We can see a similar S curl in a Stuart portrait of Mrs. James Swann.



Gilbert Stuart's studio was a block away from Grumblethorpe in the back of 5140 Germantown Avenue. The photo was taken after a fire. GHS archives.



The author's grandfather, grandmother, and mother in the 1930s. Courtesy David McCann.

A study of other portraits by Gilbert Stuart always shows the white glowing dot of paint between the 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock position in the iris. In Catherine's portrait it is at 10 o'clock. I believe "the eyes have it"—they look very similar in all of Stuart's portraits.

The portrait resembles Stuart's other portraits of women in its boldness and animation. The portrait's features, the vivid brushstrokes, the canvas covering wood all suggest Stuart's hand.

10 Dorinda Evans, *The Genius of Gilbert Stuart* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 79.
11 Ibid., 75.
12 Marcia Goldberg, "Textured Panels in 19th Century American Painting," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 32, 1, article 4, 33–42, 1993.

Conclusion

Whether or not the portrait is proved to be by Gilbert Stuart, it is a wonderful painting of an independent and strong Quaker woman, Catherine Wister Miles. In my continuing efforts to prove that it is a Stuart portrait, I am meeting with three experts, including the director of the Smithsonian's Portrait Gallery, for a day-long overview of the portrait.

David McCann has been a student of history his whole life. He has served in the military and, more recently, completed 20 years of government service. The first book he ever read was a children's biography of Winston Churchill, which made a lasting impression on him. He values the connection history provides in giving all of us a sense of our being—where we have come from and the potential for where we can go. Mr. McCann lives in Akron, Ohio.

Acknowledgments

Akron-Summit County, Ohio, Public Library and librarians Dana Beezley-Kwasnicka and Judith James, for providing resources and for help in using the library's interlibrary loan service; Beth Ann Campano, Great Lakes Art Conservation (Cleveland, Ohio); College of Wooster (Ohio); Corcoran Museum of Art (Washington, D.C.); Marianne Henein (Washington, D.C.); Cuyahoga Community College (Cleveland, Ohio); Walsh College (Canton, Ohio); Toledo, Ohio Public Library; The University of Akron (Ohio), and Roger Durbin, Ph.D.; Kent State University (Ohio); the Kenyon College Library (Gambier, Ohio); The Library of Congress; The American Philosophical Society and Valerie-Ann Lutz and Charles Greifenstein (Philadelphia, Pa.); Samford University (Birmingham, Alabama); the San Jacinto Museum (Houston, Texas); The College of William and Mary—Swem Library; The Centre County (Pa.) Historical Society; and Joyce Adgate; the Winterthur Library—Downs Collection of Manuscripts (Delaware); Case Western Reserve University—Kelvin Smith Library (Ohio); the Free Library of Philadelphia; Midwest Infrared's Rich Mansfield, Raymond Hershey, and photographer Mark Holaday. All were very kind in providing assistance and resource materials.

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